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FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1138  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0555  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1167  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0606

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000323

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C O R R E C T E D - C O P Y CHANGE TO PAR 1 AND 5

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/19/2017  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [LA](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [JA](#)  
SUBJECT: LAO GOVERNMENT MEETING ON NORTH KOREAN CHILDREN  
SCHEDULED; GOL OPPOSES RESETTLEMENT IN U.S.

REF: VIENTIANE 296

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Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Haslach. Reason: 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: South Korean Embassy Counsellor Miyon Lee told us on April 19 that senior Lao government officials would soon meet to decide on the fate of three North Korean children who have been detained in Laos since November 2006.

She said that the Lao have made it a condition of the children's release that they be resettled in South Korea rather than in the United States. A Japanese diplomat described the Japanese NGO that has publicized the children's plight as well-established, although he, like us, did not consider the group's high-profile approach constructive. The extensive publicity the children's situation has recently attracted has further complicated a situation that North Korean involvement had already made more difficult. End summary.

¶2. (C) DCM called South Korean Embassy Counsellor Miyon Lee on April 19 regarding the three North Korean children who have been detained in Laos since November 2006. Ms. Lee said that her embassy had tried unsuccessfully throughout the Lao New Year holiday (April 14-18) to get a meeting with Lao officials. However, Lao officials did tell them by phone that there would soon be a meeting by "higher level" officials (probably the Politburo) to decide on what to do with the children. She expected to hear the outcome within a day or so. Ms. Lee said that the Lao government is making it a condition of the children's release that they be resettled in South Korea (i.e., rather than in the United States, where they have reportedly said that they want to go).

¶3. (C) As noted in Reftel, the South Koreans believed they were on the brink of a quietly negotiated solution in early April, but a communication on the issue that the Lao government misdirected to the North Korean Embassy led to demands by the North Koreans that the children be returned to North Korea. According to press reports, a North Korean Embassy official visited the Vientiane detention facility where the children are being held and demanded their release.

Further complicating matters was a sudden flurry of publicity generated by a Japanese NGO, Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, a representative of which reportedly visited the children in prison. The story was picked up first by the Japanese and Korean media and later by media outlets worldwide, including the Washington Post and International

¶4. (C) The South Korean Ambassador approached the Ambassador at an April 12 Lao New Year event hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said that he had not been instructed to demarche the Lao government about the issue but asked for advice on which officials might be most helpful. The Ambassador suggested that he contact Vice Foreign Minister Bounkeut, who handles relations with Asia. VFM Bounkeut was helpful in resolving the situation of a North Korean asylum seeker who took refuge in this Embassy in 2005.

The South Korean Ambassador said that, in the meantime, the embassy's consular chief was discussing the issue with Lao immigration officials. It is not clear where in the Lao government the official who told Ms. Lee about the "higher level" meeting works, or how senior this official is.

¶5. (C) Acting Japanese DCM Akihiko Fuji met with the DCM and Pol/Econ Chief April 19 at his request to discuss the North Korean children. DCM and Pol/Econ Chief told him that the USG's primary objective is to see the children safely resettled. Any Lao perception of USG involvement would be counterproductive to this goal. As a result, our approach is one of carefully monitoring the situation but refraining from official intervention. The USG considers the intensive press coverage detrimental to a resolution. Mr. Fuji agreed. Mr. Fuji asked about the possibility of the children resettling in the U.S. The DCM and Pol/Econ Chief said that the Embassy had no role in this; any resettlement request would, as usual, be handled by the office of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees. Mr. Fuji said that Life Fund is a well-established Japanese NGO that has worked on behalf of North Korean refugees since 1998. Its representatives are not brokers. However, he did not consider the group's high-profile approach constructive. Asked whether the Japanese Embassy has been approached by asylum seekers, Mr. Fuji said that it has not. (Comment: In contrast to our very forthright South Korean counterparts, our Japanese colleagues may be withholding information on this issue. As noted reftel, the Japanese DCM urgently requested a meeting with us to ask how we handled the asylum seeker in 2005. At the April 5 meeting, he told the DCM that this was just for contingency planning purposes. However, Ms. Lee of the South

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Korean Embassy later told us that a Japanese citizen who had escaped from North Korea after voluntarily resettling there had approached the Japanese Embassy for assistance in resettling in Japan. Likewise, there could have been an unstated reason for Mr. Fuji's visit. End comment.)

¶6. (C) Comment: We are not surprised that the GOL is making it a condition of the children's release that they not be resettled in the United States. In addition to being consistent with their general hostility to anything they regard as part of the U.S.'s human rights agenda, this is a way for them to avoid embarrassing the North Koreans. (Maintaining good relations with both Koreas is an important policy priority for the Lao.) We have thought all along that the children's reported request to resettle in the U.S. is what led to their prolonged detention, in contrast with the relatively rapid release of another group detained at around the same time (not to mention the dozens of North Koreans who have successfully made their way from China to Thailand through Laos in the past year). Of course, the children, if they are in fact released, may have the opportunity to seek resettlement in the U.S. regardless of their initial destination. End comment.

HASLACH